



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

"This zany novel gallops through the perils of one  
thirty-something redhead's desperate search for love  
and marriage, not necessarily in that order."

—*Elle* (Canada)

HAPPILY EVER  
AFTER?

# ARRANGED

A NOVEL

CATHERINE MCKENZIE

AUTHOR OF *SPIN*

## Chapter 1

### Enough Is Enough

“I read your emails,” I tell Stuart.

His head snaps up from his copy of *Maxim*. His sock-covered feet are resting on the glass coffee table that sits in front of the leather couch we bought six months ago. An innocent pose, though he’s guilty as hell.

“You what?”

“You heard me.”

The planes of his angular face harden. “I’d better not be hearing you.”

I feel a moment of guilt. Then I remember what I read.

“I read your emails. All of them.” He opens his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. “How could I violate your privacy? Is that what you were going to say? Don’t you talk to me about violations, Stuart. Don’t you even dare.”

He shuts his mouth so quickly his teeth click. His wheels are spinning. I can almost see the movement behind his eyes, which can be so warm, so sexy, so everything, but at this moment are so cold, so hard, and so damn blue.

Catherine McKenzie

“What do you think you read, Anne?” he says eventually, his voice tightly controlled, a blank slate.

“Are you really going to make me say it out loud?”

He stays silent. The light from the reading lamp glints off his straight black hair. A clock ticks on the mantel above the fireplace, measuring out the seconds I have left here.

I take a deep breath. “I know you slept with Christy. I know you’ve been sleeping with her for a while.”

There. I said it. And even though I knew it, even though I read it, actually saying it brings it to life in a way I hadn’t anticipated. It’s so much larger now that it’s in the room. So much worse. As if Christy is here with us. As if she’s repeating the words she wrote to him, in the soft, sultry voice I heard once on the answering machine. Words I can’t erase.

The clock keeps ticking. I feel caught, waiting for him to do or say something.

Say something, goddammit. Say something!

He stands up as if he heard me. The magazine slaps to the polished wood floor.

“Well, bravo, Anne, you caught me! What’re you going to do about it?”

Jesus Christ. Wouldn’t it be great if you could videotape people during a breakup? Wouldn’t it be great if you could have access to that videotape at the *beginning* of a relationship? Look how this guy’s going to be treating you in six, eight, ten months. Look how he treated the girl he spent three years with! Run away, run away!

## ARRANGED

My breath rattles in my throat, but I get the words out. "I'm leaving."

"You're leaving," he repeats, maybe a statement, maybe a question. Like something he can't quite bring himself to believe.

"Do you really expect me to stay? After what you've done? Is that what you even want?"

His eyes shift away from mine, the first sign of weakness. "I don't know."

"Oh, Stuart, please. This is exactly what you want. You just don't want to be the bad guy. So instead, you've made sure I'll be the one who ends it. And I've been too stupid to figure that out until now."

"You think you're so smart, don't you?"

"I've just finished telling you I've been stupid. But yes, today I think I'm being smart."

"Well, I'm not leaving the apartment, if that's what you think is going to happen."

"God, you really don't know me at all, do you? After all this time."

He scoffs. "Oh, I know you, Anne. Don't you worry about that."

I consider him: his beauty, his anger, this man I thought I'd marry.

"So, I guess this is it," I say, because this is what people always seem to say in these kinds of situations. At least that's what they say in the movies, and right now my life feels like an invented life.

Catherine McKenzie

He doesn't answer me. He watches me walk to the hall closet and reach for the duffel bag I stashed there earlier with everything I need for the immediate future packed inside.

I turn to face him. I look into his eyes, searching for something, I don't know what.

"Goodbye, Stuart."

"Goodbye, Anne."

I hesitate, waiting for him to say something more, to beg me to stay, to tell me I love you, it's all a mistake, I'm a complete asshole, I can't live without you, please, darling, please. But he isn't going to give me that. Not now that I'm finally letting him have what he wants. Because he *is* an asshole, and I'm an idiot for wanting anything from him, no matter how small.

So before he can call me on it, or ask me why I'm still here, I hoist the bag over my shoulder and walk out.

Outside, I get into the waiting cab and direct it to my new apartment.

I don't notice the twenty minutes it takes to travel from my old life to the new. The city streets are blurred streaks of light against the black night sky.

The driver raps on the grimy glass between us to get my attention. I exit the cab and stare up at my new building. Four stories, redbrick, high ceilings, wood floors, shops nearby. The listing seemed too good to be true when I saw it online yesterday. The rent is more than I can afford, but I needed a new place to live, pronto. And while, in the past, I might have

## ARRANGED

stayed at a friend's or, God forbid, my parents', thirty-three seems too old for that. Too old for a lot of things.

I walk up the thick concrete stairs to the front door. The panel next to my buzzer is blank, ready for me to fill it in. My apartment's blank too. There's nothing on the pale cream walls but the dusty outline of the posters that used to hang there. The air smells different, alien. My eyes rest on the nook beneath the curved bay window. It's the perfect place for the writing desk I left across town. I have that itchy feeling I get when I need to write. Only I don't know if I can write about today. Not yet, anyway.

Through the walls (upstairs? downstairs? I haven't figured out the sounds here yet), I hear a woman's voice calling her man to dinner in a loving voice, and it cuts the legs out from under me. In an instant, I'm on my knees, strangled cries in my throat.

Oh my God, how did this happen to me? How did it take so long for me to see through him? How did I put myself, my *heart*, in the hands of a man who would betray me? Again?

My cell rings next to me. A glance at the screen tells me it's Stuart. He's too late. There's nothing he can say that will erase what I read, what he did.

I throw the phone as hard as I can. It hits the doorframe, a loud sound in this quiet, empty place. A chip of paint flies off the wood, and the ringing stops. I hug my knees to my chest and stare at the silenced instrument.

Time passes. Eventually, I start to breathe. The hardwood floor makes its presence known.

Catherine McKenzie

My cell phone rings again. The force of my anger wasn't enough to silence it permanently. This time the caller is a lifeline. My best friend, Sarah.

"Hey, it's me," she says, concerned, apprehensive. "We still on for that drink?"

My voice is stronger than I thought it would be. "Are we ever. I'll be there in ten."

I wash my face and grab a thin trench coat from my duffel bag. My new neighborhood waits outside. The brick buildings end where the sidewalks begin—seamless—and the only trees stand in the small parks that dot every other block. Their changing leaves rustle in the fall breeze. The air is thick with car exhaust and the mix of smells issuing from the restaurants. The streets feel alive and claustrophobic at the same time.

I liked the silence of my old neighborhood, where the noise of the city was just a whisper in the background. But I like the energy I'm getting from the noise around me now, the people, and the sensation that something could happen at any moment.

A block from the bar, something on the ground catches my eye. Is that my last name? I bend to pick it up, and sure enough, it's a business card that reads:



## ARRANGED

Something about seeing my name on the card gives me a thrill. Without really thinking about it, I put it in the front pocket of my jeans and keep walking.

I enter the bar and scan the dark room for Sarah. The White Lion is halfway toward trendy, with red leather stools tucked under a worn mahogany bar. Tiny white lights frame the wall of mirrors behind it. A Taylor Swift song is audible above the murmur of the Tuesday-night crowd.

Sarah's sitting in one of the dark upholstered booths, typing furiously on her BlackBerry. She's wearing a navy business suit, and her curly blond hair is bunched at the base of her neck. Her pale skin seems almost translucent under the muted lighting.

She smiles at me as I sit across from her. Her teeth are small and even. "So?"

"I did it," I say, waving over the waitress.

"Thank *God*."

"Do you really hate him that much?"

"I really do."

I order a gin and tonic. "And the reason you never said anything is?"

Her cobalt eyes are full of disbelief. "What are you talking about? First of all, I did say something. And second, I figured it would be better for me to hang around and make sure you were okay, rather than have us get into a big fight and never see you again."

Sarah's a lawyer, and she's always making lists. It's the way she thinks—organized. She's been this way as long as I've known her, i.e., since nursery school.



Catherine McKenzie

“Thanks for that.”

“No worries. I just wish I hadn’t dragged you to that party.”

I met Stuart at a party three years ago. I was about to turn thirty and was still getting over being dumped by the then love of my life, John. Sarah convinced me it would be good to “get back out there.” I wasn’t so sure, but Sarah isn’t someone you say no to.

I spotted Stuart shortly after we arrived. Straight black hair, clear blue eyes, over six feet tall, slim—he was exactly the kind of man I always fall for, ever since my first crush on a boy. He had a circle of girls around him, vying for his attention. But the girls didn’t daunt me. I was used to the girls. You had to be when your weakness was very good-looking men.

I was working on how to get him to notice me when Sarah did it for me by accidentally spilling her red wine down the front of my white sweater. I seized the moment and overreacted, making a dramatic fuss. It had the desired effect, as all eyes, including Stuart’s, traveled toward us. I made eye contact with him, held his gaze briefly, and looked away.

When Sarah and I got back from cleaning me up in the bathroom, we found a spot on a couch. I positioned myself so I couldn’t look in Stuart’s direction. I could tell, though, that he was watching me.

Later, when the boys gathered to do triple shots of Jack Daniel’s, I saw my opportunity and muscled my way into the group. A few of them protested that I wasn’t strong enough to handle it. I tied my long red hair into a ponytail and told them I could take care of myself, just pour it. We clinked glasses

## ARRANGED

and opened our throats. Only a few of them managed to get it down in one shot, but I turned my glass over with a flourish and brought it down hard on the tray Stuart was holding. I looked up at him, flushed, seeing the interest in his eyes.

“What finally made you leave?” Sarah asks.

“Have you ever noticed how no story that begins ‘I read his emails’ ever finishes with ‘I was completely wrong; he wasn’t cheating on me’?”

She wrinkles her small nose. “So he *was* cheating on you?”

“Of course he was. Just like you said.”

“Yes, well. It didn’t give me any pleasure to tell you that.” She fiddles with the lime on the rim of her glass.

“I know, Sarah.”

“Good. I have to say, you’re taking this awfully well.”

Of course, she didn’t see me sobbing on the floor. “Am I fooling you too?”

“Almost.”

“It’s amazing what extreme anger gives you the strength to do.”

She smiles. “If someone figured out a way to bottle woman-been-wronged, they’d make a fortune.”

“What I really need is a product that can cure a broken heart.”

“I think it’s called alcohol.”

I try to smile but end up crying. Quiet, salty tears.

Sarah slips her hand over mine. “It’ll get easier, Anne. In time.”

“I know. It always does.” I wipe my tears away with the

Catherine McKenzie

back of my hand and force myself to smile. "Enough. We're supposed to be celebrating my new life."

I raise my glass. Sarah clicks hers to mine. "To Anne Blythe's new life!"

"That reminds me. Look what I found on the street." I dig the card out of my pocket and hand it to her.

"Why did you pick this up?"

"Because my name was on it, I guess. I wonder what they do?"

"'Arrangements Made,' and the symbols for male and female . . . it must be some kind of dating service."

"Good point. Maybe if I get really desperate, I'll call and find out."

Sarah blushes. "You don't have to be desperate to use a dating service."

"Have you . . . used one?"

"No, but I was thinking about it before I met Mike." Sarah smiles the way she always does whenever she speaks about him. He's a stockbroker who works in her building. They met six months ago at a cocktail party. So far, he's disproving my theory that men who are still single at thirty-five are single for a reason.

As for me: newly single at thirty-three? I've got all kinds of theories.

"You're lucky to have him," I tell her.

"I am. And you'll be lucky too, Anne."

"Yeah, maybe. But for now, I think I'm going to be alone for a while and see how that feels."

I try to sound like I mean it, even though being alone has

## ARRANGED

never been my strong suit. Not the old Anne's, anyway. But the Anne who was strong enough to walk away from Stuart today *is* going to be on her own for a while. At least she's going to try to be.

We finish our drinks, pay up, and head out into the night. Fall's settling in, and it's cooler than it was a few hours ago. I stick my suddenly cold hands in my pockets, hugging my coat around me. Sarah hails a cab and climbs in.

She rolls down the window. "You'll be fine, Anne. Just believe it and it'll come true."

As her cab disappears into traffic, I wonder if she's right. Can I really make myself better if I wish it hard enough?

I close my eyes and slowly click my heels together three times. I will be okay. I will be okay. I will be okay. I open my eyes and look up to the North Star shining brightly above me, the only star visible in this city sky. Feeling silly, I seal my wish on it and head home.

Back in my new apartment, I walk around the empty, echoey rooms, trying to decide where I should sleep. The guy whose lease I took over left his couch and his bed. I'm not sure which would be less creepy to sleep on. I pick the couch and go to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I clean the loose change out of my pockets, along with the Blythe & Company card. I brush my fingers over the raised lettering and feel a prick of curiosity. "Arrangements Made." It seems so formal, old-fashioned.

Should I call and find out what they do? If it's a dating service, should I use it? No, that's silly. Didn't I just decide I

Catherine McKenzie

needed to be alone? That's right, I did. So, I'll be alone. And then I'll find a new man, the right man, on my own.

I throw the card in the direction of the wastebasket in my old bathroom. It hits the tile with a sharp *click*. I pick it up and read it again. I feel the same thrill I did earlier. Something about the card feels lucky, like the fortune cookie I once got that said, "You were born to write," which is now hanging, framed, in my cubicle at *Twist* magazine.

I need something lucky right now.

I tuck the card into the black rim of the mirror above the white pedestal sink.

It couldn't hurt to keep it for a while.